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ABSTRACT

As socially supported institutions, schools must take their share of the responsibility for developing a comprehensive curriculum about family life and sexuality education. Schools have the opportunity to integrate sound sexual information, understanding of attitudes, and the development of knowledge related to sexual matters along with instruction students receive in other areas. A concern of school administrators and teachers is opposition from community action groups, some of which may be organized outside the community and involve relatively few actual community members. Parents rightfully have the primary responsibility and opportunity for assisting their children in the development of positive health practices, attitudes, and values including those connected with human sexuality. While the majority of parents feel that sex education is important for their children, less than 20 percent of parents actually take an active role in educating their children. The ideal in formal school sexuality education programs is to have the school working in a partnership with parents in providing accurate and honest sexuality education. However, parents will not understand the school's intentions of partnership unless the school makes them aware of it and works with them. Sexuality education can realistically be regarded as a valid educational pursuit which holds the promise of making significant contributions. It can add not only to the solution of important social problems but also to the enrichment of individual personal lives. (JD)

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Sexuality Education: What it is and What it Isn't

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Sexuality Education

Sexuality is a vital and basic human quality which is present in every dimension of being a person. Its existance cannot be questioned.

Our sexuality isn't something that we just "pick up" or suddenly develop. It is a part of our daily personal and social learning that starts at birth and continues until we die.

Sexuality is a reflection of human character. It is not solely our "sex" or gender identity or just the act of an intimate physical involvment. Human sexuality is a part of our total personality and is mixed in with the biological, psychological, social, spiritural and cultural dimensions of life.

We all have sexual feelings and characteristics. Recognizing this fact contributes to our positive self image and to the understanding of ourselves and others in interpersonal relationships.

By the age of two, we have already identified ourselves as being male or female. Functioning in this role is a life-long process of personal and social development. It involves our gender identity, attitudes, values and behaviors.

Normal growth and development takes place in a common sequence of events. However, the rate at which we pass through each developmental phase is highly individualistic.

Every person has sexual feelings, attitudes and beliefs but the experience of sexuality is unique because it is processed through an intensely personal perspective. This perspective comes from both personal experiences and social sources. It is impossible to truly understand human sexuality without recognizing its multi-dimensional nature.

Sexuality is integrated into all aspects of being a male or a female. It is a human component that is subject to life's dramatical changes.

As we grow and develop we encounter a variety of experiences which make an impact on our sexuality.

Many elements in our society place a great deal of appeal and importance on our sexuality. Commercial industries often cater to our sexual drives to sell products and we are often told how to look and feel sexy by the way we dress, talk, and even smell!

Observations of daily human interactions and of the culture we live in shows that our lives are filled with both subtle and blatent sexual messages.

Our sexual learning is first influenced by our parent and friends. We also acquire and assimilate definitions, skills and values from other people and sources around us. Our sexual conduct evolves from human interactions and is judged and performed within the context of our own culture.

What we presently think about sexuality is a result of a variety of experiences we have had throughout our lives.

Parents rightfully have the primary responsibility and opportunity for assisting their children in the development of positive health practices, attitudes and values including those associated with human sexuality. But even when parents do not discuss sexual matters, the child detects their attitudes through non-verbal communication and the very fact that there is no communication.

Learning about sexuality is not an even that is limited exclusively to youth but a process spanning our entire lifetime. As a continuous but often unnoticed lifelong process, sexual learning occurs in the course of everyday living.

A child's developing sexuality is continually and inevitably influenced by daily contacts within the family, community and environmental media. Studies show though that of all the influencial sources, children would prefer to have their own parents talk to them about it.

One major problem exists: the development of positive attitudes toward sexuality in early life is often left to chance.

Many factors in our social evironment contribute to irresponsible sexual behavior. The most obvious include the lack of accurate sexual information, unrealistic expectations held by individuals of all ages, the impact of exploitive media and social phenomenom such as poverty, sexism, the double standard and peer pressure.

The situation which we are facing is that the sexual attitudes, values and behaviors developing in many individuals are based on ignaorance and half-truths. But with parental, community and social concern being directed toward the guidance of the development of positive sexual understanding, many people, young and old, can be steered toward a more realistic direction.

The need for a well-planned comprehensive sexuality education program is increasing.

Over the past 100 years, females have shown a trend in menstruating at earlier ages and at the same time marrying later. Unplanned child-bearing is increasing and has emerged as a problem with serious health, social and social and economic implications for the young individuals involved, their families and indeed the whole society. This trend along with the fact that parents, churches and schools often delay talking about sexuality to young people until "they're old enough" has proven that when they are old enough, it is sometimes too late.

In assessing knowledge about sexuality, a great many teenagers appear to be misinformed about the relationship between sexual behavior and conception and sexually transmitted diseases. More specifically, many young people do not realisticly relate their sexual activity with their own chances of being involved in an unplanned event.

One root of the problem may be that teens report that they receive 90% of their information about sexuality from peers and mass media and not from parents, churches or schools. Unfortunately those who are the most sexually active at young ages are those who know the least about the consequences.

From recently compiled data, the facts are clear ... Teenage sexual involvement is widespread and along with this is found many unplanned pregnancies and reported cases of sexually transmitted diseases.

The many social, economic and personal costs related to the ignorance surrounding sexual matters implies a lack of effective family life and sexuality education.

Parents hold an important role in a child's early devlopment of attitudes toward sexuality and as their primary sexuality educators. Many parents have taken the extra time and effort to assist their children in developing a realistic and honest appreciation of their own sexuality and that of others. But only a small number of parents, for a variety of reasons, feel that they can provide their children with accurate sexual information in a comfortable and timely manner.

School programs in Sexuality Education have been developed to aid the parent in working toward building positive perceptions of sexuality in the lives of their children. Here are some of the issues which have come up.

"Sex Education is intercourse education and my kids certainly don't need any of that"
-Sexuality Education courses in elementary or high school do not teach intercourse techniques. What they do address are topics which set out to establish positive self concepts about sexuality, communication and decision making skills, normal physical and mental development along with personal and interpersonal social relationships.

"Well I didn't have any Sex Education and look at me - I'm married, have a good job and six kids to boot!"
-In today's society, both open and subliminal messages about sexuality are used more than in previous years. At the same time, social support and structure on what is right or wrong is not being offered to aid decision making. Sexuality Education aids the student in placing the sexual aspects of life in their honest perspectives and gives factual information that will help reduce many misconceptions.

"Sex Education is too controversial and starts too young".
-To begin with, a person's sexuality starts at birth with or without guidance, so the timing of a program is already after sexuality is a factor in our lives. A properly planned program addresses the needs of students as well as the community. Few controversies have occured when parents have taken an active part in deciding what should be taught and when it should be taught, while addressing the students needs and their normal developmental interests. Sexuality Education is ideally planned to address matters before they become a major consequence in a person's life. One major problem is that in relation to Sexuality Education, society tends to favor ignorance over knowledge.

"Sex Education in school will corrupt the students' morals, give them sexual ideas and cause sex experimentation"
-There is no evidence to back this statement. It still remains that sexuality is a natural part of the human personality. Research constantly points to increases in knowledge as a result of participation in family life and sexuality education programs. Positive impact on sexual attitudes have also been recorded along with increased parent/child interaction and the delaying of premature sexual experimentation.

"Sex courses are a deviant plot and don't belong in our schools"
-Sex courses and Sexuality Education are two different things. As for a plot the only one behind Sexuality Education is aimed at aiding people in their personal and social growth process.

"I don't like the idea of different values being taught to my child in a sexuality class".
-In actuality the values which are addressed in Sexuality Education courses are those fostering an appreciation for critical intelligence, respect for truth and the right of individuals to self determination. These values are basic to all human beings and are reinforced through the education principles. Young people do not reach adolescense without having been exposed to many sets of values. Although it is impossible to achieve concensus about sexual values, it is urgent that we deal truthfully and critically with the variety of sexual value systems.

"School curriculum is already overcrowded without adding any additional courses."
-Sexuality Education can be included in part of health classes or similar courses already existing that deal with total personality development.

"But who will teach my kids sexuality and how do they decide what is right for my child?"
-Parents, community leaders, students and professional educators are encouraged to decide on both teacher selection, training and course content. A skilled teacher who is knowledgable and comfortable with their sexuality, an effective facilitator of group interaction and sensitive yet professional is the ideal person for the role of a formal sexuality educator.

"I still feel that parents have the right to decide what is best for their children. Sexuality Education is taking away this right!"
-The foundations of Sexuality Education are based on the considerations of parental rights and concerns. One general concern that parents have expressed is their own reluctance and barriers for effective communication with their children on sexuality matters. Sexuality Education in the schools is offering to work in a partnership with parents to keep healthy communication open, dissolve barriers and develop a positive understanding of sexuality.

With sexuality being a sensitive, deep rooted personal part of human existence that it is, school programs alone cannot be expected to affect all of the related occurances. What it can do is play its supporting role in conjunction with the family and church in this aspect of life.

The need for formal Sexuality Education courses has been expressed by many groups, the most important of which are the parents and students themselves.

One fact stands out clearly: the majority of parents who are inevitably responsible for the sexuality education of their children do feel that it is important for their child. In practice though less than 20% of the parents actually take an active role in doing anything about it.

Because of the perceived need for effective sexuality education, various organizations have taken it upon themselves to support parental concerns and play active roles in developing programs. Many of the major organized religions have taken strong stands in support of sexuality education and even have developed their own curriculum.

Support for programs come from a long list of groups including the National Parent-Teachers Association, American Medical Association, National Education Association, U.S. Department of Education, Department of Health and Human Services and the YM and YWCA.

In working toward meeting the needs of individuals, families and society, a growing partnership has been offered for addressing Sexuality Education.

Addressing this issue effectively is a difficult task. Presently society offers only fragmented approaches in dealing constructively with sexual concerns.

Can this problem be accurately be dealt with?

As socially supported institutions, schools must take their share of the responsibility for offering to develop a comprehensive curriculum involving family life and sexuality education. This needs to be implemented at the appropriate maturity level of the students.

Most people need a structure which permits them to explore and discuss sexual related issues. The school program can respond to this need.

Schools are often the center of a child's social learning. This social "Sphere of influence" is ideal to present to a large number of people, true and honest information about sexuality.

Schools have the opportunity to integrate sound sexual information, understanding of attitudes and the development of social skills related to sexual matters alongside instruction students' receive in other areas.

Schools are best equipped to insure that sexuality education is taught by trained professionals. Specializing in this field, schools and teachers stay abreast of current research and present instruction from an objective view point. And by utilizing a variety of teaching resources they can assure student exposure to accurate information and skill building techniques.

In addition to teaching students, schools can easily include parental education classes. This may bring parent and child to a closer understanding of sexuality and each other.

From several sources it has been concluded that 80% of the U.S. adult population agree that sexuality education should be included in schools.

The problem is that less than 36% of the nations schools address this concern at any level and many are fragmented programs which are either inappropriately short or offer information not pertinent to the students' needs.

What ever misconceptions one has about sexuality education programs established goals do exist. Consider the following:
The programs work to provide accurate information about human sexuality, facilitate insights into personal sexual behavior and give students a positive feeling about their sexuality. They strive to reduce fears and anxieties about personal development and feelings and help people make informed choices. Encouragement for responsible and successful decision making takes place along with the development of skill for management of possible sexual problems. Courses encourage student to question, explore and assess their sexual attitudes and promote communition with parents and peers. They also promote the development of tolerent attitudes toward the sexual make-up of others and facilitate rewarding sexual expression. The instruction helps to integrate one's sexuality in a balanced and purposeful pattern of living and helps students grow toward managment of emotions leading to responsible behavior. The final goals of programs are to reduce sexuality problems like sexually transmitted diseases and unintended pregnancies.

There is considerably more to sexuality education than the word don't.

The content of education programs in schools is determined by the community. There does not exist any one program which is universal to all schools and communities. The main reason for this is that the content of programs, in order to be effective, needs to address the concerns of all those involved.

Within the programs itself, it is important to offer students not only information which parents, teachers and community members feel is important, but information they want to know. Responsiveness to students needs and to their suggestions and criticisms is a key factor in assuring a quality program.

One of the most important influences of a successful program is the teacher. He or she must be comfortable with both teaching the subject of sexuality and be highly skilled and motivated to act as an educational facilitator in the classroom.

Within the classroom, it is necessary to extablish an atmosphere where dignified discussion regarding human sexuality can take place; discussions which recognize and respect a variety of viewpoints.

Sexuality Education takes a positive, thoughtful look at what we are and promotes living our lives realistically.

Even though parental support for programs is widely evident, there are parents who have concerns about the content and objectives of the programs and the qualifications of the teachers. This issue needs to be addressed.

A real concern of school administrators and teachers is the fear of opposition from community action groups. Some groups may be organized outside the community and invole relatively few of the actual community members. But all oposition should not be judged collectively. It is imparitive that planners listen to <u>all</u> community members in perspective and respect their opinions.

The ideal in formal school Sexuality Education programs is to have the school working in a partnership with parents in providing accurate and honest sexuality education. But parents will not understand the school's intentions of partnership unless the school makes them aware of it and works with them. Implementing sexuality education programs can not be done without a lot of support and effort from many people. In the long run the rewards will be reflected in a more positive society for our children.

Sexuality Education can realisticly be regarded as a valid educational pursuit which holds the promise of making significant contributions. It can aid not only to the solution of important social problems but also to the enrichment of individual personal lives.

Sound Sexuality Education then is not merely the reporting of correct sexual information, nor just a course in reproductive anatomy or even just a manual of contraceptive technology. It is not the mere communication of information. Rather, it addresses human sexuality in a multi-dimensional aspect of living and takes place in a setting of rich human, personal and social concerns.

We are told through public surveys and reports that parents welcome support of sexuality instruction. Student themselves are enthusiastic of learning about the real world they are growing up in. Our sexuality is just one part of this world; why not address it realisticly ourselves. If we don't we are leaving it up to someone else.

Is this the way we want to educate our children?